



A Good Society Depends on Hospitality, Order, and Justice

Rob Schwarzwald

If you go into any grocery store, the first thing you'll notice is order. The aisles are in precisely ordered rows. Food, flowers, and goods of all kinds are delegated to specific areas and signs and numbers point to where you can find what you want.

You can also find things based on experience, observation, and signs that post what each aisle contains. There is clarity, predictability, and neatness. Order.

That kind of order is based on order of a different kind – social order. Lower middle-income Americans and people in the economic quintiles above them live, generally, in pleasant communities. They are not perfect or crime-free or without many personal problems, but they are decent and essentially safe and productive because of certain assumptions born-out by common desire and experience.

Among the common threads are family stability, effective law enforcement, and a good infrastructure. The American suburbs and small towns have it pretty good.

Most areas in the world aren't like many of the ones where we were raised. Were you to visit areas in Syria or northern Nigeria or the slums of any number of developing world cities, you would find great disorder. People living in hovels, crammed in together in no particular pattern. Sanitation is unknown. The threat of attack by bands of terrorists or neighborhood gangs hangs in the air like a cutlass.

Let's bring it closer to home. Near where I work in Washington, DC, there is a city-run shelter for homeless men and women. Many of them are mentally ill or addicted to drugs or alcohol. These tragically broken image-bearers of God deserve better than to be warehoused in an often dangerous facility with little or no help. In this center, one finds alienation, confusion, fear, and an absence of hope. Social insecurity and uncertainty prevent the order my family and I presume upon just a few miles away.

Order doesn't just happen. It takes personal initiative. We see this as early as Genesis 18, in the account of Abraham greeting what many commentators believe is an encounter with the Holy Trinity:

And the Lord appeared to (Abraham) by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a

morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.”

Note that Abraham’s first impulse was worship. That was appropriate, given that the Triune God was standing right before him. But his second impulse was hospitality. Writing of the ancient Middle East, historian Rodney K. Duke has written, “The plight of aliens was desperate. They lacked membership in the community, be it tribe, city-state, or nation. As an alienated person, the traveler often needed immediate food and lodging. Widows, orphans, the poor, or sojourners from other lands lacked the familial or community status that provided a landed inheritance, the means of making a living, and protection.”¹

The question is, how is hospitality related to order – and how is order related to justice?

Hospitality in the biblical sense involves compassion, generosity, sacrifice, and empathy. When one receives these gifts, he is likely to give them back to others as they need.

This type of reciprocal kindness is like yeast: It permeates the dough of social experience, and becomes the norm for the larger society.

I once went on a six-week mission trip to Trinidad. One of the things that was so striking to me was the hospitality of the family with which I lived. They were poor, and lived in a home infested with roaches and all manner of insects. They had very little. But once they found out I liked Coca-Cola, they bought a case of it and served it to me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Other Trinidadians couldn’t give my team and me enough. They loaded us down with food at every opportunity. They were eager to have us join them in whatever they were doing. One of my indelible memories is that most of them smiled all the time – not a forced smile but a genuine one, one of delight in being with and hosting strangers.

These kinds of practices and attitudes have a reciprocal effect, as I mentioned, with the result that widespread personal civility, kindness, and hospitality become part of a cultural norm.

Cultural norms also inform and temper inner restraint. The Founders of our country were insistent on this point: Political self-government and a healthy society itself relied on internal self-government. As John Adams said in a letter to his cousin Zabdiel Adams in 1776, “It is religion and morality alone, which can establish the principles upon which freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free constitution is pure virtue; and if this cannot be inspired into our people in a greater measure than they have it now, they may change their rulers and the forms of government, but they will not obtain a lasting liberty. They will only exchange tyrants and tyrannies.”²

Without personal virtue, both negative (what we will not do) and positive (what we will do), individual lives become chaotic and miserable. When there are many such lives – and, all around us, we see them in growing number – society itself begins to collapse. Writing in his book, *A Free People’s Suicide*, Os Guinness explains that “Freedom requires order and therefore restraint, yet the only restraint that does not contradict freedom is self-restraint, which is the very thing that freedom undermines when it flourishes. Thus the heart of the problem of freedom is the problem of the heart, because free societies are characterized by restlessness at their core... so freedom depends constantly not only on the character of a nation’s leaders but also on the character of its citizens.”³

The good news is that things don't have to be this way. By encouraging virtuous character, we help construct and sustain a culture we can all live in with general security and well-being. Yet such construction is an ongoing, ever-incomplete process. Virtue is impermanent and must be nourished in one's soul even as the body is nourished physically. It must be modeled and taught consistently. Ultimately, only faith in Christ can evince such character. Only His transformation can re-shape the spirit and the heart, what Paul the apostle calls "the inner man" (Ephesians 3:16).

At the same time, Scripture calls on Christians to "do good to all men" (Galatians 6:10), and this must include both living-out truth, liberty, and justice and seeking to build a society by which these things are characterized. We can seek to appeal to the reason and the conscience (Romans 1:19-20, 2:15) of our fellow citizens through personal relationships and advocating for effective, honorable public policies, consistently, graciously, and wisely. Additionally, we need what have been called "intermediary institutions:" churches and synagogues, voluntary associations of all kinds, clubs and neighborhood pools and local schools and so forth. All of these grow from common assumptions about the way people want to be treated and the way we can thrive individually and collectively. Personal hospitality, showing courtesy and kindness to persons we don't know in casual and formal settings, in private and in public, in professional life and when at leisure, encourages others to do the same. This builds social hospitality – and that means social order.

Even more important is the most natural and foundational institution of all: the family.

Today, according to federal government data, only about 46 percent of children reach the age of 18 in a home with a mom and a dad.⁴ Fatherlessness is common,⁵ divorce is rampant, as are promiscuity and cohabitation. Children are the victims.⁶

When parents reject one another, they are in a profound sense rejecting their children. Trust is irreparably broken.

How does this affect order? If the modeling of two complementary parents – a mother and a father – is not present, children lack the very foundation of understanding how people should treat one another.

Without fathers, sons become much more likely to gravitate to surrogates all too ready to prey upon their vulnerability.

Children of divorce are much less likely to graduate from high school, let alone college.⁷ Their emotional stability is weaker and their tendency to engage in crime is much higher. Their income earning potential is diminished. And so on.

Their lives are disordered early-on, setting the stage for disorders of various types throughout their lives. This has serious social ramifications, some of which I just mentioned. Shattered families can lead to shattered lives. Shattered lives – lives without strong emotional, moral, and spiritual inner restraints – lead to the splintering of ordered society.

Of course, not all children of divorce become criminals, and if a woman is in an abusive marriage, I am not arguing she should stay. I'm talking in broader terms that the social science data make clear.

Thus, hospitality helps breed a culture of mutual respect and personal kindness. That kind of culture leads to social order of the kind that cannot be enforced by any law and helps build the personal

character, or virtue, so important to a free society. Social order also presupposes justice: that people will get what they deserve, whether reward or punishment.

Tim Keller, in his book, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*, notes that "The Hebrew word for 'justice,' mishpat, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. It means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty."⁸

But Keller notes that mishpat "means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights. Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people's income. This support is described as 'the priests' mishpat,' which means their due or their right. Mishpat, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care."⁹

Grounded on the assumption that each person merits just treatment based on his essential dignity as an image-bearer of God, pursuing a more just society with respect to everything from criminal justice reform to the way we show hospitality to friends of friends who just need a place to stay is a Christ-honoring venture.

The theologian David Wells has written, "The whole system of modern life envelopes those who live by it and infuses into them its values in a manner that is entirely impersonal."¹⁰ This is especially true of those without families who are eager to adopt the behaviors of those who profess to offer affirmation and warmth, even if those things are granted at the cost of one's decency or even life.

So, for Christians, hospitality is more than just welcoming people into your home, although that's important. Kindness, generosity, personal interest, and an investment of time in relationship all compose what it means to be hospitable in our time. Hospitality helps lead to order, and order is an essential component of justice in its fullest, biblical sense.

Theologian Stephen Grabill has noted that "We are made in God's image, called to be gift-givers of the Gift-giver. If we pour out our lives, using our gifts to bless others, we will – in turn – be blessed. This communal blessing produces abundance and flourishing."¹¹

It also produces opportunities to share the greatest, most truly welcoming message of all time – that God became man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that He died for our sins and rose from the grave for our justification, and that He offers forgiveness and new and eternal life to all who will receive Him.

Having a platform of hospitality, order, and justice from which we can share that Good News is a pretty valuable endeavor for Christians in our time and at all times.

Rob Schwarzwaldner serves as Senior Vice President at Family Research Council, where he oversees the Policy department. He previously served as chief-of-staff to two Members of Congress and as a presidential appointee at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹ Rodney K. Duke, "Hospitality," Bible Study Tools, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/hospitality/>.

-
- ² John Adams, "Letter to Zabdiel Adams, June 21, 1776 (On reason, honor, and love of liberty)," Founding.com, accessed February 1, 2016, http://www.founding.com/founders_library/pageID.2144/default.asp.
- ³ Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide: Sustainable Freedom and the American Future* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 20-21.
- ⁴ Patrick F. Fagan, "The Fourth Annual Index of Family Belonging and Rejection," Marriage & Religion Research Institute, February 12, 2014, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF14B32.pdf>.
- ⁵ Rob Schwarzwald and Natasha Tax, "Daddy's Girl: How Fatherlessness Impacts Early Sexual Activity, Teen Pregnancy, and Sexual Abuse," Family Research Council, December 2015, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF15L32.pdf>.
- ⁶ "Effects of Fatherlessness on Children's Development," Marriage & Religion Research Institute, 2014, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF14K18.pdf>.
- ⁷ "Marriage vs. Divorce," Marriage & Religion Research Institute, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF15A67.pdf>.
- ⁸ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 3-4.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 287.
- ¹¹ Stephen Grabill, "The Big Picture - Exile: Our New Perspective," The Gospel Coalition, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-big-picture>.